Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 16 Number 1 January 2019

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 20th January 2019: Air Force Academy, Dundigal. Meeting points: Opp. Mangatrai Pearls, Punjagutta, 6.00AM.

The Academy is a training institute for the training of Indian Air Force pilots. Special permission has been taken for our visit of our members. The Academy has a vast campus with a lot of greenery and should afford good bird variety. Apart from birding, we would also be shown their aircraft, etc.

The route to the Academy is via Balkampet, Balanagar and on to the Narsapur highway, about 35 kms from the city. Please reach latest by 7:00AM so that security formalities can be completed. Please carry your Aadhaar cards as also your BSAP ID cards, which would be of some help. This would be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Shafaatulla (98492-29552).

MY BIRDWATCHING DEBUT

Trip Report – Anna Sagar, Jogipet, November 25, 2018

Text: Samata Srinivasula; Photos: Gurukumar KR

Woolly-necked Stork

Birding is a concept introduced to me by my father. My experience of bird watching was always confined to spotting a few common birds during wildlife safaris. I was introduced to exclusive bird watching at Annasagar Lake, Sangareddy. The Annasagar lake is located about 100 kilometers away from the city of Hyderabad and a kilometre away from a town called Jogipet in Sangareddy district.

My debut birding trip began at 6:00AM when we started from our houses and reached the destination by 8:00AM. As soon as we stepped out of our cars at the view point, we had a panoramic view of the lake with flocks of various migrant birds, which is why it is a popular spot for exotic and unusual birds during the migration season.

I was a little apprehensive about what to expect from this journey as this was my first exclusive birding trip ever. All I carried with me, apart from food and water, were binoculars, my phone and a handbook of birds. To my surprise, I was welcomed heartily by the Deccan Birders team. They introduced me to the art of birding and made me understand the beauty of it. Mr Shafaat Ulla, Mr Aasheesh, Ms Anita and the others were encouraging and helped me spot and identify many species.

Short-toed Snake Eagle

The birds that immediately caught my eye were the Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*), about 75 of them (males, females and juveniles). There were over 100 Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), a dozen Eurasian Spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodea*) and Painted Storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*), a couple of Avocets (*Recurvirostra avocetta*), Asian Openbills (*Anastomus oscitans*) and Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*). Each of these birds were unique in their own way and it was an immensely exciting experience to get to know the birds and identify them.

Ruff

Among the Ducks, the Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*) was my personal favourite. A Garganey (*Anas querquedula*), two Northern Pintails (*Anas acuta*), a Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) and Common Teals (*Anas crecca*) were among the others.

We first spotted these birds from the view point of the lake and later moved closer to the water body to explore a few other species and to get a closer and clearer glimpse of these magnificent birds.

Common Hawk Cuckoo

At about 12:30PM, we started looking for some shade beneath the trees to have our food. As we were having tasty sandwiches, paneer, curd rice and fruits, we were also fortunate enough to spot a few arboreal birds like the Ashy Prinias (*Prinia socialis*), three Black Drongos (*Dicrurus macrocercus*), three Blue-tailed Bee-eaters (*Merops philippinus*) and two Indian Golden Orioles (*Oriolus oriolus*). Right before starting back, three Black Kites (*Milvus migrans*) graced us with their presence high up in the sky.

The one thing that bothered me was human interference around the lake. A huge crowd consisting of the local people gathered right next to the lake for reasons best known to them. Although they did not disturb the birds intentionally, their presence definitely resulted in the birds moving to the other side of the lake away from the humans.

All in all, however, it was a spectacular experience for me as a debutant birder, as I had the opportunity to experience professional birding with the elite team and also got to learn a lot from them. I look forward to the next birding trip.

The group at Anna Sagar

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SIGHTING OF THE INDIAN SKIMMER AT KAKINADA

Sudhir Moorti K

Indian Skimmer (Photos: Umesh Mani)

Come winter and all of us birders make a beeline to the wetlands to watch, record and photograph our lovely visitors from far off lands. This winter was no different for us and we set off to the coastal town of Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh. Apart from the famous Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary, there are lesser known birding hotspots in Kakinada which are quite amazing.

One such hotspot is a place known as Kumbabhishekam. With the Kakinada deep water port on one side and a Ravana Temple on the other, with a fishing jetty right next to it, it is a unique mudflat habitat.

The Kumbhabhishekam mudflats comprise a small area of about 100 acres. Each year thousands of waders like Little Stints, various plovers, sandpipers etc., are sighted here; Great Knots (*Calidris tenuirostris*) have also been regularly reported from Kumbhabhishekam.

On the 7th of January, 2019, four of us – Mrutyumjaya Rao *garu*, Umesh Mani, Srikanth Bhamidipati and I – visited this area and were awestruck to find a flock of more than 200 Indian Skimmers (*Rynchops albicollis*) squatting on the far bank. A large congregation such as this is very rare and unprecedented for this region. Other than sightings of 1 or 2 individuals reported from this region – and one instance of around 23 birds – there is no record of such a large flock. They are, however known to winter in coastal estuaries and there have been a few reports from Chennai, further down south.

The Indian Skimmer is a part of the Genus Rynchops in the family Laridae. These birds resemble the Terns, but with a bright orange bill with a longer lower mandible, which they use to plough the water as a method of catching aquatic prey. Known breeding populations are found in the Chambal River Area and Mahanadi River.

The world population of this species is estimated at less than 10000 individuals, and declining. The IUCN has classified the species as Vulnerable (Vu) which indicates that the existence of this species is threatened due to rapidly declining population and loss of habitat. Here's hoping that this sighting is a good omen and the numbers of this magnificent species grow by leaps and bounds!

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Trip Report – Aravalli Biodiversity Park, Gurugram, August-September 2018

Text and Photos: Sita Susarla

A view of Aravalli Biodiversity Park

The Aravalli Biodiversity Park in Gurugram spreads over 153.7 hectares and is a symbol of restored ecology. Its transformation from a mining and stone-crushing hub to a biodiversity park is the result of unrelenting efforts of passionate nature-lovers. When we visited the park on two consecutive weekends in the months of August and September, it was buzzing with the calls of Black (*Francolinus francolinus*) and Grey Francolins (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), Jacobin (*Clamator jacobinus*) and Common Hawk Cuckoos (*Hierococcyx varius*), Koels, Babblers and Prinias. Our main interest was to see the Black Francolin, Savanna Nightjar (*Caprimulgus affinis*) and Eurasian Roller (*Coracias garrulus*) that are commonly seen in this season.

Black Francolin

The park had different trails to explore. Walking on one such path we heard the "*kwee-kweeeee-kwee*" call of a Black Francolin. We followed the call and reached the edge of an erstwhile mine pit that was now green with the native Aravalli plants. Standing majestically on the other side of the pit was the Black Francolin. It kept calling at regular intervals and there was an occasional response call from the distant hillocks, probably from its mate. With a white patch on its cheek, a chestnut collar and golden-scalloped black body, the Black Francolin is a complete contrast to the Grey Francolin.

As we walked back on this trail amid the chirping of Indian Silverbills (*Euodice malabarica*) and the song of the Indian Bushlark (*Mirafra erythroptera*), we found ourselves at the exit gate of the park. We ventured out about a furlong from this gate to another mining pit that lay bare, probably because this is outside the park area and, therefore, not restored to its original ecology. Here we saw many Blue-tailed Bee-eaters (*Merops philippinus*) and Red Avadavats (*Amandava amandava*) amidst the sparse vegetation.

Red Avadavat

On the ground a bunch of Lemon Emigrant butterflies were mud-puddling. The butterflies, it is said, draw their minerals from mud as it is not available in the nectar of flowers.

Lemon Emigrant

Savanna Nightjar

As we walked through the grass bushes a Savanna Nightjar got flushed out. After a sluggish flight it landed on a rocky patch. We readied our cameras to take pictures but due to camouflage it took us a while to spot it again. In the bright sunlight it sat where it landed, unmoved by the clicks of the cameras. This was the first close look we had had of any Nightjar, and we were very excited to see it in the open, and that too for a very long time. The upper parts were brownish and vermiculated with brown speckles. The Savanna Nightjar is a resident bird and nocturnal in nature. It resides in open forests among tall grasses.

Jungle Prinia

On the second weekend we were at the park half an hour earlier than our previous visit and tried two different paths that we had not covered earlier. We hoped to see the Eurasian Roller this time. The Black Francolin, Jungle Prinia (*Prinia sylvatica*), White-eared Bulbuls (*Pycnonotus leucotis*), Common Babblers (*Turdoides caudata*) and Baya Weavers (*Ploceus philippinus*) were all there. So were the Common Hoopoes (*Upupa epops*).

Common Hoopoe

A White-eyed Buzzard (*Butastur teesa*) flew past us and landed on a distant tree top. We had to deviate to a different trail to reach the Buzzard. After half an hour of walking we found ourselves face to face with a vast stretch of denuded hillocks. Luck was on our side and we found Eurasian Rollers, about half a dozen of them, very actively flying from one tree to another. The bird was almost the same size but paler than the Indian Roller. The Eurasian Roller is a passage migrant in this region in autumn, as some populations are known to migrate to Africa through India.

Eurasian Roller

Now we scanned for the Buzzard and sighted a juvenile one. All this time the Black Francolins were calling and so were the Jacobin Cuckoos. One interesting behaviour was that of a juvenile Jacobin Cuckoo amidst a few Jungle Babblers. It immediately reminded me of the brood parasitic nature of the Jacobin Cuckoo, wherein it lays its turquoise-blue eggs in the nest of the Babblers. The Babblers probably were still nurturing the juvenile cuckoo, thinking that it was a bird of its own flock!

Overall, it was wonderful birding in the Aravalli Biodiversity Park.

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DIVING EXPERIENCES OFF THE UNEXPLORED WEST COAST

Text and Photos: Amritha Lawrence

The author with Bluestreak Cleaner Wrasse

The Indian subcontinent is the most beautiful place in the world – it has everything to offer, from spirituality to one of the most diverse ecosystems that houses some of the most exotic species in the world, both on land and in water. The unexplored paradise of water is something that has always been a mystery to people, with a lot happening under the surface of the deep blue. Join me, as we explore these places and see the world that lives below the blue waters of this country.

As a dive master, currently working in the west coast of this country, every day is a joy. To wake up each day and sail along this coast for diving is always a different experience, right from boarding the boat to reaching the dive destination. Netrani is an island that gives me this experience. It is situated 20km off the coast of the small town of Murudeshwar (156km from Mangalore). This island is a diving, snorkeling and birding paradise. The sight of pelagic birds soaring in the sky, and a group of Snappers swimming right underneath, make you wish you were a four-eyed fish.

Snapper

The island is surrounded by different dive sites and each has a uniqueness that belongs only to that particular place. From watching Cuttlefish mating, to watching a group of Surgeonfish just rubbing themselves on the boulder surface to take away the fungus, and Moray Eels just wandering about their own business - this place always has action with not a single dull day.

Surgeonfish

Honeycomb Moray Eel

Nudibranch

Some surprises, like being greeted by Whales and sometimes watching Turtles just burrow under small piles of corals, make you want to wake up every day. Each and every corner of the rocks here have something to offer, like for instance the Nudibranchs, tiny colourful slugs that are just crawling about doing what they do the best.

The best part about my job is that I get to find these things and explore the unexplored blues over here. This life-changing experience is something I would recommend to everyone. It gives you a sense of achievement, the chance to watch marine life in all its beauty and, most importantly, it allows you to be a part of something new and gives you a chance to explore the unexplored depths of this country.

To explore a totally different world – this incredibly vibrant deep blue world – is such a pleasure. Why restrict ourselves to images of underwater life when we can just watch it come to life every day?

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A DANDELI ADVENTURE

Trip Report – Dandeli, October 2018

Text and Photos: Barnali Chaudhari

A view of Dandeli forests

Bestowed with natural beauty and lush green forests, Dandeli is the ideal mix of wildlife, adventure, scenic beauty and birding. The four of us (Surekha, Kalyani, Dr Jayati and I) started our journey towards Dandeli from Hyderabad to enjoy a long weekend. Dr Sheila and Dr Vipin joined us from Mumbai.

On October 19, 2018, we reached Hubli. I was amazed at the Warli art on the subway walls of Hubli railway station. We started our journey from Hubli around noon in a hired car, escorted by a Forest Department jeep. Mr Gundappa, our forest guide, was always with us and taking care of us. In a twist of events, we had to take the scenic route to avoid a road accident on the highway. While it took us longer to get our destination, we were blessed to see the beautiful landscape in the rain.

We reached Castle Rock Nature Education Camp around 4:20PM. We passed through a small hanging bridge. After crossing the bridge, the road was made of concrete with pebbles for added friction during rain: an innovative idea! We had some breathtaking views of hills, and soon I felt like a part of Mother Nature.

At Castle Rock

We saw several Golden Orioles (*Oriolus oriolus*), Orange Minivets (*Pericrocotus flammeus*), and assorted Drongos. We walked around exploring nearby areas and watched the beautiful colors of the sunset. We heard the call of the Castle Rock Night Frog which was just like somebody typing on a typewriter. Hence it was nicknamed the 'Typewriter Frog'. After dinner we rested in the tent. Next day during breakfast we saw some Flycatchers and Sunbirds. I enjoyed the panoramic view from the observatory tower. After that we said good bye to Castle Rock.

Asian Brown Flycatcher

Our day unfolded with lots of adventures. First, we headed towards Canopy Walk which is India's first, just 65 km away from Dandeli, near Castle Rock of Uttara Kannada. It is made of several hanging bridges connected to each other with big tree trunks. We explored the beauty of the Western Ghats at close quarters. Installed at a height of 30ft, the 240m walkway has multiple viewing areas. It has been developed jointly by Karnataka Tourism and the Forest Department. We saw Malabar Tamarind, Cinnamon, Bamboo, Eucalyptus, Lantana, Silver Oak, Teak trees, etc. We took in the sounds of the jungle and became one with it. An Asian Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa dauurica*) was sitting on the railing of the canopy walk.

Bastilla sp. Moth

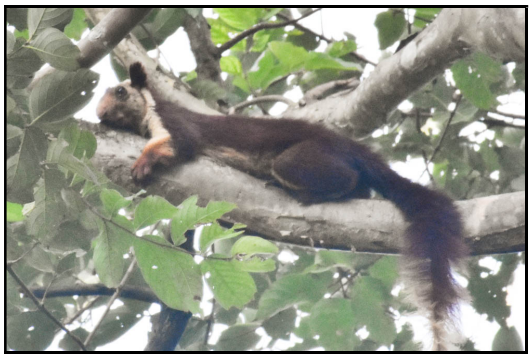
Sheila noticed a moth on the pathway which was camouflaged by dry leaves. Unfortunately, we could not spot any animals. In spite of taking precautions like applying Dettol on our sneakers, leeches did not leave us alone. However, overall, it was an experience we will always cherish.

River rafting on Kali River

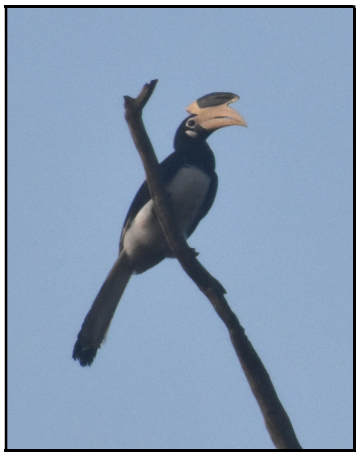
After enjoying the Canopy Walk our next target was river rafting on Kali River. We reached our destination around 11:00AM. We were equipped with a life jacket, helmet and pedal. The Dandeli river rafting trail stretches for around 12km. Kim, our guide, was the head of the instructors and had 28 years of experience. Before starting he briefed us about the techniques of pedaling and safety measures. Kim first put water on us through his pedal. Then some of us jumped inside the water and bathed in the river. We climbed the raft again and started downstream. We were 11 rafters including Kim. The first rafting stretch is the most exciting one. This path is full of huge boulders, hence, requires expert steering. Our boat went hurtling down the river towards the rapids and bumpy rocks and narrow passageways. The first and second rapids are named 'Adi's Beard' and 'The Stitch' respectively. We experienced the thrill of a lifetime. We saw a pair of Great Hornbills and a Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*) in flight. All of us loved river rafting, even those of us who were non-swimmers.

Mr Gundappa with Green Vine Snake

Around 2:00PM we started back. As we boarded our vehicle, Mr Gundappa came with a Green Vine Snake in his hand. We learnt from him that this snake is a mildly venomous tree snake found in India and is very common in the Western Ghats.



Malabar Giant Squirrel

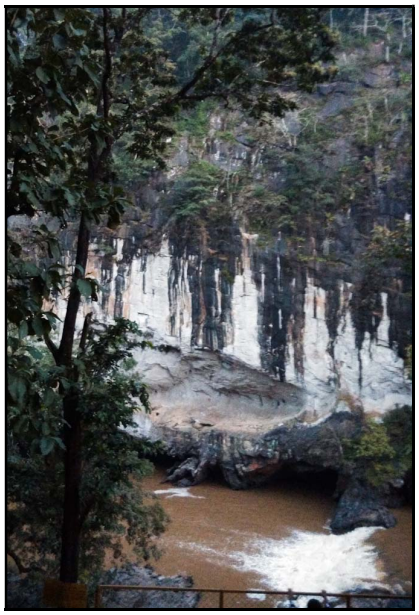


Malabar Pied Hornbill

We reached Kulgi Nature Camp and had lunch. We saw a Giant Squirrel on a tree trunk. A pair of Malabar Pied Hornbills was sitting on a tree. Jungle Babblers (*Turdoides striata*) and Spotted Doves (*Stigmatopelia chinensis*) were moving around.

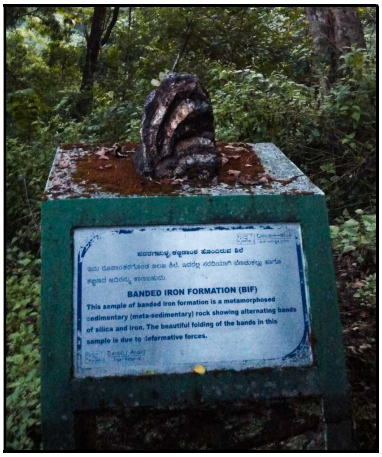
Jungle Babbler

Our next destination was Supa Dam. There are many dams built across Kali River for the generation of electricity. Supa Dam is one of the important dams and is situated at Ganeshgudi. It has two electricity generators of fifty megawatt each.



Syntheri Rock

Our last destination for the day was Syntheri Rock. We reached at dusk. We entered the park and tried to enjoy as much as possible in the dim light. We went down about 200+ steps to get a glimpse of a monolithic rock hidden amidst the forests. On our way down, different types of rock samples were displayed with a board explaining the type of the rock and its characteristics. One stone attracted my attention – the Banded Iron Formation (BIF): Meta sedimentary rock showing alternating bands of silica and iron. Various trees were also described.


BANDED IRON FORMATION (BIF)
This sample of banded iron formation is a metamorphosed sedimentary (meta-sedimentary) rock showing alternating bands of silica and iron. The beautiful folding of the bands in this sample is due to deformative forces.

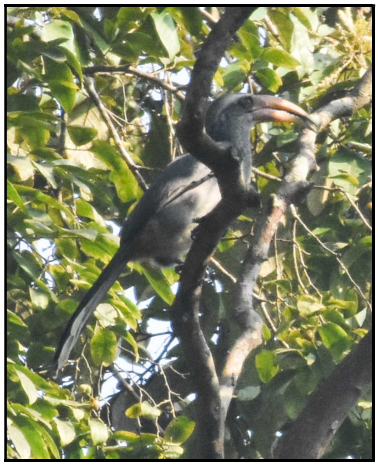
Banded Iron Formation

All of us have heard the proverb that the force of water flow can even cut a stone. The caves of the Syntheri Rock are an example of that. The caves were created at the base of the rock due to the constant flow of water. A huge monolithic single boulder 300 feet high and 400 feet long stood in front of us with the river Kaneri (a tributary of Kali River) flowing down. It is believed to have been formed due to volcanic eruptions several thousand years ago and one can see homogeneous rock that has different colors and textures in different parts. It was named after Ms Cinthera, an English lady, who is believed to discovered the place a century ago. We took a *kaccha* ramp (easier path) while coming back. By this time the sun had set and it was dark.

By around 7:30PM we came back to our tent at Kulgi Nature Camp. The tent was named Jenukallu after a village. In the video room named Nagzari, we learnt about the Kali River and wild elephant rehabilitation. Then we had dinner at the dining hall.

Little Spiderhunter

Early the next morning we went for birding with our guide Jogi. He was a good birdwatcher with an in-depth knowledge of calls, species and habits. At one spot beside the road, we saw the Little Spiderhunter (*Arachnothera longirostra*). Then we visited the Timber Depot. Here we saw a live demonstration of a dog trained to track down poachers in the forest by his master Venkatesh.



Malabar Grey Hornbill

Timber Depot, with its logs lying scattered over a vast area, is famous for the sightings of all the three hornbills – Great Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*), Malabar Pied Hornbill (*Anthracoceros coronatus*) and Malabar Grey Hornbill (*Ocyceros griseus*) – found in the Western Ghats. That is why Timber Depot is also called Hornbills Trail. We were lucky to spot all the three.

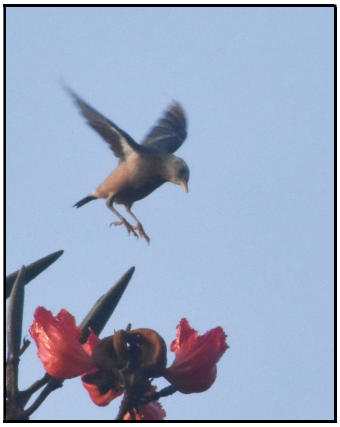
Wooden logs with the designs formed by wood-boring beetles

We sat on the logs and noticed some special designs on the logs. Dr Vipin told us about one of the wonders of nature - a type of wood-boring beetle lays eggs and the larvae which feed on wood after hatching from the egg, create characteristic tunnels in the process. After pupating and developing into adults they leave the timber.

Jacobin Cuckoo

We saw a Jacobin Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*) perched on a tree trunk. We also observed a lot of bird activity over the fully-bloomed African Tulip trees with beautiful red flowers. Several birds were busy with their morning activities. The Jerdon's (*Chloropsis jerdoni*) and Golden-fronted Leafbirds (*Chloropsis aurifrons*) were totally camouflaged in the leaves. The Blyth's Starling (*Sturnia (malabarica) blythii*) was busy getting honey from the flowers. We spotted both White-throated (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) and Stork-billed Kingfishers (*Pelargopsis capensis*).

Jerdon's Leafbird



Blyth's Starling

At Old Magazine House

After breakfast at Hornbill Resort we went to Old Magazine House. Like Sattal Studio, Old Magazine House offers bird watching at a very close range. There is no concept of walking and tracking birds as they come to bathe at the camp itself.

Heart-spotted Woodpecker

There we saw a pair of Heart-spotted Woodpeckers (*Hemicircus canente*). We also saw Langurs and Bonnet Macaques on the trees. One Bonnet Macaque was spitting out the fibrous leftovers of the sticks after consuming the juice in it, just like we eat sugarcane.

Cruiser

Soon, it was time to say good bye to Dandeli. Thanks to Surekha for arranging such a memorable trip.

The group at Dandeli

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